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**Arabic and English in Contact:  
Effect of Mixing versus Separation upon  
EFL Listening Comprehension**  
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**Abstract**

Although Arabic is extensively used in the teaching of English in Egypt, there is a conspicuous absence of investigations of how it can be effectively used in this process. This study, therefore, is an attempt to determine the effect of mixing English and Arabic versus using the two languages separately on EFL listening comprehension. The subjects for the study consisted of 153 2nd year pupils enrolled in four classes attending two preparatory schools in Ismailia governorate. In two classes the mixing approach, in which the teacher shifted back and forth between English and Arabic in each listening session, was used ( McLaughlin 1978 ). In the other two classes the separation approach, in which the teacher used Arabic at the beginning and English in the rest of each listening session, was used ( Swain 1983 ).

Statistical treatment of the data using the t-test revealed a significant difference between the average mean scores of the two experimental groups in favour of the group exposed to the separation approach. These results were discussed and directions for further research were suggested.

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### **Introduction**

The most commonly held view in the 1950s and 1960s was that the mother tongue was the prime or even the sole cause of a learner's problems with the second or foreign language ( Lado 1957; Lee 1968; Politzer 1965, 1968; Weinreich 1953 ). This view was closely linked to the behaviourist learning theory which sees that language learning is a process of habit formation and that old habits get in the way of new ones.

Yet, in the 1970s a growing body of empirical studies showed that transfer from the mother tongue plays little or no role in second language acquisition ( Dulay and Burt 1974, Gillis and Weber 1976, Gonzalez and Elijah 1979, Hansen-Bede 1975, Ioup and Kruse 1977, White 1977 ) and that errors made by second language learners are to a large extent common to learners with different mother tongues ( Buteau 1970; Richards 1971a, 1971b ). As a result of these findings in addition to the theoretical attacks on the behaviourist learning theory, L1 interference fell into disfavour and the mother tongue is no longer a hindrance to second or foreign language learning. Dulay et al. ( 1982: 96 ) express this idea in the following way:

The first language has long been considered the villain in second language learning, the major cause of a learner's problems with the new language. In recent years, however, data have been accumulated that place the L2 learner's first language in a more respectable, sometimes even valuable, place in the scheme of things. The first language is no longer considered an annoying "interference" in a learner's efforts to acquire a second language. ...

In this new atmosphere, the mother tongue is viewed as " a resource of knowledge which learners will use both consciously and subconsciously to help them sift the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can in the L2 " (Ellis 1986:40). This study,

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therefore, is an attempt to determine an effective approach to putting this resource to use in the EFL classroom.

#### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the present study was to determine the effect of mixing English and Arabic versus using the two languages separately upon the listening comprehension of EFL students at the preparatory school level. More specifically, the researcher's hypothesis was that there would be no significant difference between the average mean score of the group exposed to the mixing approach and that of the group exposed to the separation approach on the pre- and post-test.

#### **Rationale for the study**

The underlying rationale for conducting the present study lies in the theoretical and practical arguments which highlight the significant role of the mother tongue in the FL comprehension process, particularly at the early stages of learning.

On the theoretical side, a variety of reasons are commonly cited for advocating the use of the mother tongue in comprehending the FL input. One reason is that the mother tongue helps pupils to get meaning across in a very short time. Mackey ( 1978: 240 ) puts it as follows:

Some methods teach all meaning through the native language. ... The reasons for using the native language to get meaning across is [ are ] that it prevents any misunderstanding, saves time and makes the gradation of the language free from physical demonstration.

Supporting this idea, Seifeddin ( 1986:203 ) states:

Mother-tongue is considered the easiest and shortest cut for providing the meanings of words, the most effective device for explaining the intricate structures

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and making clear contrasts of phonology. It is also the most accurate way of giving drill/test instructions. ... Mother-tongue can also serve a communicative pedagogical function in FL classes. In teaching / learning situations, mother-tongue can be used so as to help students understand and further FL communication.

A second reason is that pupils inevitably and consciously bring their mother tongue into the FL comprehension process. According to Finocchiaro ( 1971:7 ):

... we delude ourselves if we think that the student is not translating each new English item into his native tongue when it is first presented to him.

In a similar vein, French ( 1979:94 ) states:

The teacher who says: ' I forbid the use of the pupil's own language in my classes: we use nothing but English in the English lessons ' is deceiving himself. He has forgotten the one thing he cannot control – what goes on the pupil's mind. He cannot tell whether, or when, his pupils are thinking in their own language. When he meets a new word, the pupil inevitably searches in his mind for the equivalent in his own language. When he finds it he is happy and satisfied; he has a pleasurable feeling of success.

A third reason is that the mother tongue plays a crucial role in the FL classroom from a psychological point of view. Seifeddin (ibid:203-204) puts it this way:

Also, mother-tongue has a vital role to play in diminishing and eliminating the psychological factors

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that impede FL teaching and learning. It is through mother-tongue employing that features like fear of incompetence / mistakes and apprehension regarding languages new and unfamiliar can be removed.

On the practical side, the researcher's experience as a teaching practice supervisor in addition to a considerable body of descriptive studies have shown that Arabic is widely used in the teaching of EFL in Egyptian schools at both the preparatory and secondary school levels ( Khorsheid 1994, Kowitz and Carroll 1990, Seifeddin 1986 ).

From the preceding, there appears to be massive support for the use of the mother tongue in the FL comprehension process. Despite this support, there is a conspicuous absence of investigations of how the mother tongue can be effectively used in the teaching of foreign language receptive skills.

#### **Importance of the study**

The importance of the study lies in the fact that it copes with what actually occurs in Egyptian EFL classrooms as well as the demands of Egyptian EFL students. ( Impressive evidence for this plea comes from the study of Khorsheid 1994, in which she found that 100% of the preparatory school pupils would like their teachers to use Arabic in the EFL classroom.)

It is hoped that this study will determine an effective approach to using Arabic in EFL listening instruction.

#### **Method Sample**

The subjects for the study consisted of 153 2nd year pupils enrolled in four classes attending two preparatory schools ( two classes in each ). These two schools were located in a lower income, rural area in Ismailia governorate. In both schools, class size was comparable as the largest class consisted of 39 pupils and the

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smallest one contained 37. All subjects began receiving EFL instruction in the first year of preparatory school.

Two female teachers from the two schools ( one from each ) volunteered to participate in the study. Both teachers were also postgraduate students in the researcher's Methodology class at Ismailia Faculty of Education in the 1994-1995 academic year.

#### **Research variables**

The **independent** variables in the study were:1) the mixing approach, and 2) the separation approach.

In the mixing approach, which might be labelled the traditional approach, the two languages ( English and Arabic ) were used concurrently. That is, the teacher read out the listening text in small units ( with a mean length of about two seconds or approximately three words each ) translating each unit into the mother tongue. The pupils then did the exercises given in their workbook.

In the separation approach, Arabic and English were kept separate. The teacher used only Arabic at the beginning to provide the pupils with the overall meaning of the listening text. He then read out the listening text with normal speed, stress and intonation without the use of translation. The pupils then did the exercises given in their workbook.

The **dependent** variable was pupils' listening comprehension.

#### **Teaching materials**

The teaching materials used in the study were the nineteen listening texts which appear in the teacher's manual *Welcome to English, Teacher's Book 2* together with the listening exercises given in *Welcome to English, Workbook 2*.

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#### **Instrument**

To verify the hypothesis of the study, a listening comprehension test was constructed to be used as a pre- and post-test. This test comprised four sections (five items in each). All test items were entirely independent of the speaking, reading and writing skills so that the testees could score up to their own listening abilities ( see Appendix A ).

Prior to using the test in the study, its content validity was established by the process of expert judgement. Nine persons, 5 inspectors, 2 ETTP lecturers and 2 university teachers reviewed the test items for relevance. Furthermore, the test reliability was assessed by administering the test to a pilot group ( n=36 ) and calculating the coefficient alpha for each set of items. The coefficient alpha for the 1st section was .85, for the 2nd section was .87, for the 3rd section was .80, and for the 4th section was .82. These coefficient alphas indicated that the overall instrument was internally consistent.

#### **Procedures**

Before the start of the study, the two participating teachers were randomly assigned to one of the two treatment conditions by flipping a coin. After that each teacher went through a training session, lasting for two hours, in the use of the approach to which she was assigned.

At the beginning of the study, all subjects were pretested. The pretest data were then analyzed by using the t-test. The findings indicated no significant difference in the listening comprehension of the two experimental groups of the study ( $t=0.22$ ,  $df=151$ ,  $p< n.s.$ ).

Following pretesting, each teacher taught the nineteen listening texts to her classes over a period of 6 months from October, 1994 until March, 1995. The two teachers taught from detailed lesson plans that were developed by the researcher to ensure that the same listening texts would be taught through using the two approaches of the study. Additionally, both teachers

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followed the textbook writer's procedures in teaching the other skills (speaking, reading and writing). Throughout the duration of the study, the researcher continued to visit the participating teachers for in-class follow-up and coaching.

At the end of the study, all subjects were posttested. Then the subject's responses to the posttest were scored without knowledge of group affiliation. Finally, the posttest scores were analyzed using the t-test for independent measures.

**Results and discussion**

The t-statistic for the posttest data revealed a significant difference between the two groups of the study in favour of the group exposed to the separation approach.

The Difference between the Mean Scores of the  
Two Groups on the Posttest

Group	N	M	S.D.	DF	T	Significance
MA Group	75	10.04	9.23			
SA Group	78	12.65	5.52	151	2.21	0.05

MA = Mixing Approach

SA = Separation Approach

As shown in the above table, the average mean score for the group exposed to the mixing approach was 10.04 (S.D. = 9.23) and for the group exposed to the separation approach was 12.65 (S.D. = 5.52). The difference between the two means was 2.61. The obtained t-value for this difference was 2.12 which is statistically significant at the 0.05 level of confidence.

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The superiority of the separation approach in this study can be attributed to the following reasons: 1) in the mixing approach breaking the code through translation does not display the features of natural speech —such as stress and intonation— which play an important role in listening comprehension, 2) mixing native and foreign languages makes it difficult for the pupils to simultaneously parse what they hear in both languages and to organize the incoming data into meaningful sections due to their short-term memory as well as their limited proficiency. Consequently, they stop listening or lag farther and farther behind the teacher, 3) the mixing approach might give pupils an erroneous notion of the relationship between languages. In other words, pupils might get the impression that there must be a corresponding word in their native language for each word they hear in the foreign language, and 4) transmitting the overall meaning of the listening text in the mother tongue at the beginning might provide encouragement and motivation for learners to conquer their fears about listening in the foreign language.

#### **Conclusions**

It should be noted before conclusions are drawn from the present study that any implications of its findings must be regarded with caution in view of the following:

1. The sample was drawn from lower-proficiency students, and therefore the results may be very different with higher-proficiency ones.
2. The sample size was small, and therefore the study needs to be replicated before one can have any confidence in the generalizability of its findings.

None the less, the findings of the study have demonstrated that the mother tongue enhances FL listening comprehension when it is used apart from the foreign language on the sentential level.

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Finally, the researcher emphasizes that the present study does not advocate the widespread use of the mother tongue in the FL classroom. However, it is an essential attempt to improve the status quo of English language teaching in Egypt, particularly at initial stages.

**Directions for further research**

The following directions for further research are suggested by the study:

1. The effect of different amounts of exposure to the mother tongue on FL listening comprehension.
2. The relationship between native- and foreign-language listening comprehension.
3. The effect of separating the mother tongue from the foreign language vs. mixing them together on FL reading comprehension.
4. The effect of writing directly in the foreign language vs. translating from the mother tongue into the foreign language on FL writing proficiency.
5. The effect of native- and foreign-language vocabulary glosses in FL reading passages on comprehension and vocabulary knowledge.

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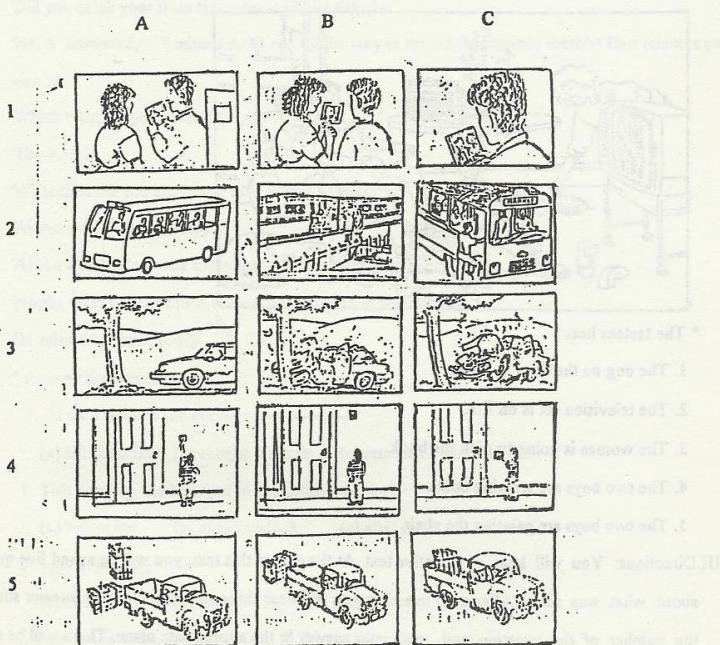
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### Appendix A

#### The Listening Comprehension Test

1. Directions: You will hear a statement for each set of pictures. Each statement will be spoken just one time. When you hear a statement, look at the three pictures and decide which one is correct. Then, on your answer sheet, find the number of the statement and mark your answer in the appropriate place. There will be a two-minute pause after each statement for reply.

\* The testees receive the following sets of pictures:



\* The testees hear:

1. He is showing her the photograph.
2. He is getting into the bus.

1. Most of these pictures are taken from Heaton 1988 and Madsen 1983.

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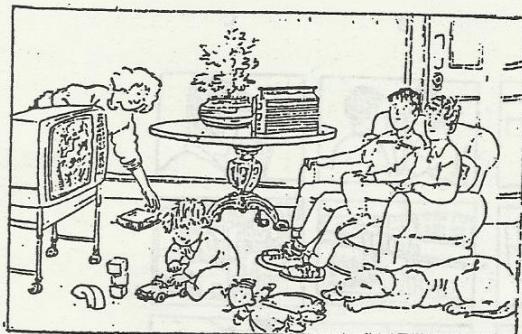
3. The car is going to crash into the tree.

4. The switch is too high to reach.

5. The box is in the back of the truck.

II. Directions: You will hear five statements about this picture but some are correct and others are incorrect. Each statement will be spoken just one time. At the end of each statement mark "T" for true and "F" for false on your answer sheet. There will be a two-minute pause after each statement for reply.

\* The testees receive this picture:



\* The testees hear :

1. The dog on the floor is asleep.

2. The television set is on fire.

3. The woman is going to pick the book.

4. The two boys are wearing coats.

5. The two boys are painting the chair.

III. Directions: You will hear a narrative text. At the end of this text, you will be asked five questions about what was said. After each question, you will hear three answers. On your answer sheet, find the number of the question and mark your answer in the appropriate place. There will be a thirty-second pause after each question for reply.

\* The testees hear:<sup>2</sup>

1. This picture is taken from Heaton 1988.

2. Adapted from Alexander 1977.

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I got home at six o'clock in the evening. // My wife opened the front door for me. //  
'Good evening, Ted,' she said. //  
'Good evening, my dear,' I answered. //  
'Are you tired?' she asked. //  
'No,' I answered, 'I'm not tired, but I'm very hungry.' //  
'Dinner will be ready in half an hour,' she said. //  
I took off my coat and sat down. // My wife sat beside me. //  
'Did you catch your train this morning?' she asked. //  
'No,' I answered, 'I missed it. I ran all the way to the station and got there at four minutes past nine.' //  
'Which train did you catch?' //  
'The 9.15.' //  
'What time did you get to the office?' she asked. //  
'At ten o'clock,' I answered. //  
'At ten o'clock!' my wife exclaimed. 'Wasn't the boss angry?' //  
'No, he wasn't at the office,' I said. 'He arrived at ten-thirty.' //  
He missed his train, too! //

\* Answer these questions:

1. At six o'clock in the evening, I-----.  
(a) left the office (b) caught the train (c) returned home
2. This morning, the boss got to the office -----.  
(a) before me (b) at ten o'clock (c) after me
3. I got home very -----.  
(a) hungry (b) angry (c) tired
4. I got to the office at -----.  
(a) nine-fifteen (b) ten o'clock (c) ten-thirty
5. After I got home, I had my -----.  
(a) breakfast (b) lunch (c) dinner

IV. Directions: You will hear five statements but some are true and others are false. Each statement will be spoken just one time. At the end of each statement mark "T" for true and "F" for false on

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your answer sheet. There will be a thirty-second pause after each statement for reply.

\* The testees hear:

1. Birds eat seeds.
2. A snake can't play football.
3. The Mediterranean Sea is too narrow.
4. The sun goes down in the evening.
5. We buy macaroni at the butcher's

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## Answer Sheet

Name :

School:

## Appendix B

Class:

I

1.  A  B  C

2.  A  B  C

3.  A  B  C

4.  A  B  C

5.  A  B  C

II.

1.  T  F

2.  T  F

3.  T  F

4.  T  F

5.  T  F

III.

1.  A  B  C

2.  A  B  C

3.  A  B  C

4.  A  B  C

5.  A  B  C

IV.

1.  T  F

2.  T  F

3.  T  F

4.  T  F

5.  T  F